

Sabbatical reflection

I was keen to study the theme of the seven churches of Revelation, after an inspirational self-guided pre-pandemic tour we had made of Greece. We had visited locations of Paul's missionary journeys and it reminded me of the real value of understanding context. This trip brought a new dimension to my understanding of Paul's letters, informing and enhancing my preaching. The fact for example, that the city of Thessalonica is built on a very steep incline, resembling a huge amphitheatre emerging from the sea, was all too apparent to me, as I struggled up that hill in the heat of the day to our accommodation. It gave me fresh admiration for Paul, as he fled from the hostile mob to escape uphill out of the city.

When I mentioned my planned visit to Turkey to my sabbatical supervisor, he initially said, 'But there's nothing there' However since his visit had been many years ago, there has been a lot of archaeological work done since then.

Rome

Before Turkey however, we were able to travel to Rome, rich in historic architecture, priceless artistic treasures, a focus of Christian history and heritage. We began with a visit to the Colosseum. Its vast arena with its blood-soaked anti-Christian history, contrasted with the joyful, extravagance of the Trevi fountain shimmering in the heatwave, cooling us as we sampled delicious thirst-quenching gelatos.

The wonderful Parthenon, with its blend of Roman, still the world's largest unsupported concrete dome in the history of architecture and Greek, with its glorious colonnades. Built on the site of a Roman temple to 'All Gods' subsequently destroyed, rebuilt, then burned. Remerged, under Emperor Hadrian (126-128 AD) as a revolutionary first church for 'the people' with its huge Oculus, symbolic of the vault of heaven. A very popular site with queues filing in and out, but the priority of this church was reassuring. You could stay indefinitely if you wanted to pray, significant areas were cordoned off, marked 'Solo Perla Preghiera' 'Only for prayers' reminder of this amazing structure's primary purpose.

Last stop on day one, was Paul and Peter's Mamertine prison. Sanitized now with a spiral staircase and display cases with unhelpful, laminated, untranslated labels. But the hole in the floor the guards flung prisoners into, to end up in a pit to die, remains.

Rome, day two, we had a brush with the law ourselves. The peace of our early morning stroll to Basilica di San Paulo was shattered, by seemingly indiscriminate blasts, from a rainbow-draped stage in a park next door. Entering the church, sited on Paul's last resting place, the serenity obliterated by an opaque wall of sound. Today, we learned Pride Rome had coincided with a massive Vasco Rossi concert. Heaving crowds merged into an intimidating mass on the metro as my husband's wallet was stolen. Walking against the tide, in the intense heat, from one inexplicably closed police station to another, we

endeavored to report the theft. I don't know why we bothered with several stations shut, police were dismissive, gathering in groups on street corners. The experience confirmed for us Rome's reputation as pick-pocketing capital of the world, so often in fact they didn't want to record it. As we left the station, I took a photograph of my husband seated outside, hot and tired as he tried to google our way out of the city. The Polizia were finally stirred into action. 'No photographs! No photographs! They shouted, this apparently was the unforgiveable sin!

Vatican City; massive buildings and a teeny tiny pope. Huge queues snaked into St Peter's, a basilican, architectural and artistic triumph. Exquisitely dressed families, carrying babies sweltering in crisp white finery, were ushered through secret, queue-evading doorways, by jolly rosy cheeked priests, who presided over sacramental chaos. Maybe there are advantages no one comes for the building when you don't have one.

Then, golden hour, the tide turns into Piazza San Pietro, crowds flowing for a glimpse of Vatican royalty, a miniature Pope at a tiny window, far, far away, uttering app translatable words. I felt somehow, sometimes when it comes to church small is beautiful.

Turkey

Istanbul, whilst not the capital of Turkey, is the country's economic, cultural, and historic hub. This is because after the first world war in 1919, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk the Turkish nationalist leader, made Ankara the centre of the resistance movement against the government of the Ottoman Sultan and invading Greek forces. Then in 1923 he declared it the capital of Turkey.

Following a hair-raising ride in a pre-booked taxi in what turned out to be a pink limo, eventually we arrived at our city centre accommodation. Walking through the restaurant below, we picked our way past the huge bags of rice that blocked the stairs, climbed darkened staircases, that spiraled up to our room. The flat, though neat and clean, as we peered out of the kitchen window, we noted the absence of any fire escape route. The cooked as advertised, was a gas canister with a ring on top! As we explored, we discovered to be a city of contrasts, welcoming and intolerant.

Welcoming, as shop keepers and restaurateurs stood outside luring customers in, I learned lessons about evangelism. From the enthusiasm of their welcome, to the passion for their products, their good-natured persistence through success and failure, in such challenging economic circumstances, put our church outreach efforts to shame. But the good news was that when you are dragged in, a Turkish breakfast is excellent, though you couldn't get a cup of English tea anywhere. Even my DIY efforts with what looked like milk but turned out to taste like rancid yogurt, were a dismal failure.

But in contrast, Istanbul, according to our guide for the day Barak, a lapsed Muslim, was also place of religious intolerance and land grab. Evident in the history of Hagia Sophia. Currently

a Mosque, it was originally built by Justinian as the Christian Cathedral of Constantinople in 532, formally called The Church of the Holy Wisdom. You can still see the Christian icons in the entrance and inside the worship area. Though these are covered up with drapes. Hagia Sophia was destroyed on more than one occasion. Religious intolerance led to it becoming a mosque. More recently it was agreed, because there were so many mosques in Istanbul, that it would become a museum. But the current, more hardline president, (Recep Tayyip Erdogan) insisted it became a mosque again. He also has used scarce public funds to build multiple brand-new mosques. There seemed to be one on every street corner. The poorest of communities who couldn't afford food, had rich gilt domes and towering minarets piercing the skyline. It seems our government isn't the only one making decisions not in the best interest of the poor.

Particularly in Istanbul I felt the intrusion of the loud Adhan, call to prayer. Every night we were woken at 4am and summoned to prayer with eerie, disturbing sounds. In the end, whenever I heard the call, I sang Christian choruses, when necessary, under my breath. We couldn't find a church we could walk to on Sunday, they had been banished out of town, like 17th century nonconformists. It is interesting that we have similar difficulties in West Thamesmead, where there is a large Mosque, but we are having to fight to be allowed land to build a church. I began to understand a little about the plight of persecuted Christians. The Islamic science museum was also an eye opener, the bias of the displays attributing pretty much everything down to Islamic scientists, made interesting, yet frustrating reading.

Izmir, this time we had a car. But I had to drive everywhere because my husband's driving license was stolen with his wallet. After a 65 Km white-knuckle ride, I did say the Turkish drivers are crazy! I was delighted to arrive at our beautiful, but inexpensive German B & B in Bergama (Pergamum) and it was stair free, with real tea and crisp white bedsheets, Heaven!

Pergamum

Pergamum used to be the ancient capital of Asia before Ephesus. Though, Bergama now looks like a one-horse town. But it has a wealth of archaeological history. The lower site, where a delighted street vendor sold us an overpriced guidebook then, unable to contain his excitement, thrust free tourist knickknacks into our hands, boasts a huge Red Basilica, originally a sanctuary for the Egyptian Gods, in Constantine's time became a church. There was also a massive healing centre, regarded as one of the most advanced in the ancient world. Dedicated to the God Asclepius, who claimed to be healed by the venom of a snake, then advocated snake venom for healing. A cult developed around Asclepius and a snake became an international symbol for the medical profession. With this at the lower level, Then above a large Acropolis, with huge statues of Gods like Zeus and multiple temples to different deities. It must have been intimidating for Christians. Not surprising the message John received for Christians in Pergamum was generally reassuring and encouraging.

“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. **(How Jesus appeared earlier in Revelation)*

¹³ I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city where Satan lives. Revelation 2:12-13

As Trip Advisor reviews go, this is not good for Pergamum the city, multiple temples to innumerable Gods. But the message for the church at Pergamum, especially those who don't renounce faith is encouraging. I reflected How would our town, or our church be reviewed.

From Pergamum we travelled to Thyatira, (Present day Akhisar)

Thyatira

Lydia seller of purple cloth and church planter in Philippi came from Thyatira (Acts 16:14)

Today it is not a tourist centre, rather a modern town, walking past shops and café, armed with guidebook, and sat nav, we finally we found a museum. Whilst informative about the history and trade of the local area. It appeared to have been well known historically for a variety of industries including clothing, wool, linen cloth, pottery, copper, and brass. To preserve standards trade guilds were established. However, each of these would have their own feasts and festivals, debauched gatherings, involving emperor worship and due homage to the trade's particular God. Christians refusing to participate would have been expelled from the guild and lose their business. 2022 news, teachers suspended for suggesting traditional Biblical views may be an option. Thyatira museum had no specifically Christian history outside, despite Turkey being the land of archaeological remains. there were just a few uninspiring remnants. As we left a young woman, dressed in a hijab, wordlessly motioned us to follow her. We walked across town to the substantial remains of large 14th Century Church, indicating the church of Thyatira was still alive and well at this time.

Revelation 2:18-26

To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. ¹⁹ I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

²⁰ Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. ²¹ I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. ²² So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. ²³ I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

Jezebel in Thyatira was called Jezebel, because she was like Jezebel, wife of Ahab in the Old Testament. Who killed off God's prophets, made everyone worship Baal and vowed to kill Elijahs had him running scared. Ahab's Jezebel met a grisly end, thrown out of a window by her eunuch's her dead body was eaten by dogs. But the Thyatiran Jezebel (Whose name I'm sure wasn't really Jezebel) was a false prophet, who was taking the Christians away from the faith into sexual immorality and idol worship. And she it seems, had judgement coming to her too. Because as Jesus said Matt 18:6 "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Thankfully, there were those who didn't 'stumble' John's word to them...

²⁴ Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets, 'I will not impose any other burden on you, ²⁵ except to hold on to what you have until I come.'

²⁶ To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations— ²⁷ that one 'will rule them with an iron sceptre and will dash them to pieces like pottery' Just as I have received authority from my father. ²⁸ I will also give that one the morning star. ²⁹ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Thyatira reminds us of the challenge of compromise.

Sardis

On the same day in contrast to our visit to the bustling town of Akhisar, we visited Sart, a tiny sleepy village. Blink and you'd miss it, but it was site of the ancient city of Sardis. We parked up, on the side of a country road. As we approached the ruins, it seemed more building site than monument. Devoid of souvenir shops or roadside vendor, here were workmen digging trenches that were full of leaking pipes that saturated the foot path, as we slithered unceremoniously, navigated our way to the ancient city of Sardis. I found myself inexplicably uttering 'Tesekkurler ederim' to the workers, I guess it was less gratitude, more a greeting, because 'Thank you' was the only Turkish word I knew!

Historically Sardis was once capital of the Lydian Kingdom, which dominated much of the Aegean before the Persians arrived, then became part of the Pergamum (Greek) Empire, which ruled Asia Minor from Pergamum.

Sardis, known as being the place where silver and gold coins were first minted. And for the rich King Croesus who lived in Sardis and built legendary fortified walls around his city. In 17 AD Sardis suffered a catastrophic earthquake, after which it was reconstructed, only to be destroyed again in 1402 by the Mongols.

The area of Asia Minor (Including Sardis) became an influential part of the Roman Empire in 133 BC. Asia was one of the richest most influential provinces. Evidence can be seen of the excavated remains of a wonderful gymnasium Asia Minor was also the province all the seven churches of Revelation. In common with all the cities in the empire it would have had temples to many other Gods, including the emperor. There are ruins of a Temple to the

Goddess Artemis (Goddess of hunt, wild animals, and wilderness) sister of the Greek God Apollo . There are also remains of what was the largest Jewish Synagogue outside Palestine

The Roman Empire was inclusive, allowing other Gods, as long as your God wasn't greater than theirs. Into this world entered Christianity. The church at Sardis began with people from very different backgrounds. Including Jewish believers in the Jesus (Messianic Jews), God-fearers Gentiles and pagans. There were no church buildings so they would gather in people's homes, to learn about Jesus. Understandably, with this mix, there were challenges as Revelation suggests.

However, the church grew and in Sardis there are remains of a fourth century church, indicate that there was a Christian worshipping community there for centuries. Evidence too that there were large houses owned by Christians, suggesting that Christians were part of a wealthy and influential community in Sardis.

We particularly loved the shop keeper's workplace Cross. He was clearly more than happy to identify himself as a Christian businessman.

What was Jesus' message to the church at Sardis?

"To the angel^[a] of the church in Sardis write: These are the words om who holds the seven spirits^[b] of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. ³ Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. ***

Stark words to the church.... You pretend you are alive spiritually, but you are dead. They are being hypocrites, outwardly religious, but inwardly spiritually dead. Faced with this spiritual diagnosis they could felt condemned and given up, but there was a cure., They needed to wake up to the truth, remember what they had received (Gospel) and repent!

The challenge to the church today is never to just go through the motions. Looking spiritual on the inside but be dead on the outside. There are consequences if we are 'If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.'

'This thief illustration is not only biblical; Matthew 24:43 talks about Jesus' return, as unpredictable, like a thief in the night.

But the history of Sardis, well known to the hearers was a tale of conquering empires twice coming like thieves in the night overpowering Sardis' King Croesus' legendary impenetrable city walls. There are consequences for us too of Spiritual death. Jesus will come for us like a thief in the night too, because no one knows the day or hour.

But there was good news for the faithful.

⁴ Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life but will

acknowledge that name before my father and his angels. ⁶ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

But there were the unfaithful too, the influence of the polytheistic society had been rubbing off on them, their clothes 'were soiled'.

Even in the Synagogue at Sardis there was compromise, evidenced by a Roman eagle at the side of the altar and other animals representing loyalty to the empire, plus reliefs from pagan culture.

Such compromise can be a danger for us too even in our positive endeavours. We have recently been partnering with others in the community to begin The Love soup Café, something I felt inspired to do as a result of my sabbatical. But even in such a collaboration there is a danger of compromising beliefs and losing the focus. In all we do we need to 'Keep our clothes clean'.

But for the faithful of Sardis and for us, there will be a reward

'They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life'

Philadelphia

Philadelphia (Alasehir) wasn't the most successful item on the itinerary. A small modern town, whose only significance is for Christians, because it is named in Revelation, turned out to be a driving nightmare. Circumnavigating the town for the third time with no stopping places and knowledge that there were no excavated remains other than a later byzantine church which was originally the City Hall we didn't stop long. However, the church is not the building, and they were reassured when they heard this message it bore fruit, resulting in church growth in numbers and significance.

"To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. ⁸ I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹ I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. ¹⁰ Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. ¹² The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on

them my new name. ¹³ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Revelation

Pamukkale,

Because it was my birthday, we stayed at a hotel in Pamukkale, there was a pool with hot springs and an over enthusiastic masseuse I will not be recommending any time soon! We walked into the village, which other guests didn't seem to do. It was a complete cultural contrast to 'fluffy-towel -world' we had become temporary citizens of. The fascinating shabby, without the chic, shops clearly aimed at the locals. My birthday treat, a cup of Turkish coffee with a side dish of people-watching and a complementary double chuck of Turkish delight. It reminded me of the township in Grabouw South Africa, where we had stayed during our second sabbatical.

At **Hierapolis** I was able, despite the intense heat to visit a wonderful museum and walk up a very long hill to see St Philips tomb. It also gave geographical context to the message given to Laodicea which was a short distance away.

Hierapolis to the north had healthy hot springs, and South, Colossae had cold springs that were clean and refreshing to drink from.

Laodicea

Laodicea had perpetual problems with its water supply, which was brought by aqueduct six miles from the south. By the time the water reached Laodicea, it had become lukewarm. It was tepid, unclean, and undrinkable, the kind of water that makes you sick, that you might spit or vomit out of your mouth. This was the background to this reading where Jesus speaks metaphorically about the Laodicean church.

¹⁴ "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. ¹⁵ I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

¹⁹ Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. ²⁰ Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

²¹ To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my father on his throne. ²² Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

We also visited Colossae,

Colossae was the most understated of the sites. Despite the road sign proclaimed Colossae, as if it were a place of archaeological interest. All we found was a hillock of possibilities. There was a hut with two men, reclining on camping chairs whose sole purpose appeared to be pointing up the hill. There were tantalising clusters of rock, sun-bleached signs with peeling lettering but three seemed to have been no excavations done so far. This was in complete contrast to Ephesus, where a wealth of treasures had been unearthed. I also loved the nearby St John's church and Mary's house, slightly away from the hustle and bustle of the Ephesian tourist trail. I have used our travels in recent sermons mentioning Kusadasi, Miletus, Priene and Smyrna, where I had another sat nav 'malfunction' which initially led us to the modern day 'Agora' (Shopping centre) rather than the ancient one. We made the best of it sampling a 'afe' Nero' before we set off to the intended location. But maybe it was God's Kairos timing because when we arrived much later than we had intended we had a wonderful encounter with a tourist, who rather like the Ethiopian eunuch wanted to the Christian significance of the places he was seeing.

For now, I would like to say I very much appreciated the opportunity to take the time to visit both Rome and Turkey. I hope that I will be able to revisit Turkey, to explore in more detail some of the emerging archaeological remains and look forward to seeing what was under the hillock on Colossae.

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